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Political Violence in Argentina

Summary. Prospects are not good for any significant diminution of the level of political violence that has plagued Argentina in recent years. Rightwing terrorists continue to operate freely and account for nearly as many deaths as leftists and security forces together. The leftist guerrilla groups, while forced into a somewhat defensive posture, are still active and are attempting to exploit worker discontent whenever possible. Given the worsening economic difficulties, these opportunities will be abundant. End Summary.

Violence to Continue

When confronted with the topic of violence and terrorism in their country many Argentines attempt to dismiss the subject by saying "it's a worldwide problem". While political violence is certainly not unique to Argentina, the levels it has reached in this country in recent years have few parallels. Recently there has been some hope for a lessening of the violence. Operations by leftist terrorists have been somewhat reduced as security forces have had some success in combating the subversive organizations. Rightwing terrorists have supposedly announced a 90-day truce to give the government time to find effective mechanisms to combat the left (BA 3742).

Do these events offer any real hope of returning to a more peaceful political process? Unfortunately, the answer would appear to be that they do not. The basic conflicts within the society are still unsolved and neither extreme seems likely to renounce the use of violence.

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Violence from the left

Leftist terrorism, inspired by the example of Che Guevara, has been a common occurrence since the kidnapping and murder of former President Aramburu in 1970. Leftist Peronists, pressuring for an end to military rule and the return of General Peron, and the non-Peronist left, demanding the creation of a socialist government, both began to make increasing use of terrorism. Well organized and financed with millions of dollars raised from kidnapping these groups operated with success and some public support prior to the election in 1973. Following the election of Peron, their popular support dropped away, and these groups found themselves isolated from the main body of Peronism as the GOA took on more and more of a rightist hue. From the point of view of the left, the Peronist government turned out to be no better than that of the military.

The GOA has had some success in hindering operations of the ERP and Montoneros, in many instances using information obtained from guerrillas who are illegally detained, tortured during interrogation and then eliminated. Newspapers are very cautious about what they publish regarding terrorism from either extreme. The stories have become nothing more than recapitulations of official press releases about successful operations by security forces. Despite the fact that tales of many unpublicized crimes are circulated, the self-censorship by the press (which the GOA enforces) adds to the image of a reduced threat from the left. The successes against the leftist guerrillas have forced them into a defensive position and brought about a change in tactics. Attacks on police and army posts have dwindled and the emphasis seems to be on trying to survive intact. In addition, a campaign to organize the workers and peasants appears to have been embarked upon, though the latter has been hurt by Army operations in Tucuman.

While leftist terrorism has diminished to some extent recently, prospects for eliminating the leftist guerrillas are not good. Their determined opposition to this government, extensive financial resources and organization, plus growing popular opposition to the government itself all militate against it.

The increasingly chaotic economic situation and continued alienation of the labor rank and file from orthodox union leaders will provide the left ample opportunities for exploitation of worker discontent.

and from the right

The Buenos Aires Herald published on May 29 its tally of the number of deaths due to political causes which have occurred since Mrs. Peron assumed the Presidency on July 1, 1974. The total number of deaths was put at 503 and was broken down as follows: 190 with leftist political affiliation, 38 with rightist affiliations, 54 policemen, 22 Army, 13 businessmen, 4 children, 1 diplomat (the U. S. Consular Agent in Cordoba), 20 others who did not fit any of the above categories, 70 unidentified bodies and 91 killed in gunfights with security forces.

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Looking at it another way, rightwing terrorists killed roughly 190 people, leftwing terrorists 128, security forces accounted for 91 and 94 more died at the hands of persons whose ideology is unclear. The vast majority of the latter category were most likely victims of the right, as it is common practice for rightwing groups to disfigure their victims in an attempt to render their remains unidentifiable.

A communique supposedly signed by the leading rightwing terrorist organization, the AAA, recently called for a 90-day truce to give the GOA time to develop legal means to combat leftist terrorism. Within days, however, other death lists appeared (BA 3832) and the bodies of young leftists continue to turn up. Perhaps one section of the AAA has decided to lay low, but the rest are clearly active.

Rightwing terrorism has arisen as a reaction against the leftist guerrillas. While the judicial system remains hopelessly inadequate and sentences are lenient or nonexistent, no serious consideration is being given to court reform; rather, the official response has been the implementation of a state of siege, under which, according to official figures, 1400 to 1800 are being held without charges at the disposition of the executive power. The unofficial response has been AAA type operations and a liberal application of the "ley de fuga" - under which suspects are shot by police while supposedly resisting arrest. Such actions have taken place with the awareness of the general public and the encouragement of certain sectors of the GOA (namely Lopez Rega and his allies in the government). Indeed as long as Lopez Rega maintains his position of power, any ethical restraints in the struggle against the left will continue to be prominent by their absence. Given the success of the illegal methods being used and since legal measures have proved ineffective in the past, rightwing terrorism is not likely to disappear.

Violence and a possible change of government

The labor unions and the political wing of the Peronist party have both proved themselves inadequate to check Lopez Rega's continuing accumulation of power (BA 3425). His most recent acquisition is his own man, Celestino Rodrigo, as Minister of Economy. Given the worsening economic situation and political climate, the probable course is for the Army once again to see itself (and to be seen by many) as the savior of the country. The military could probably force Lopez Rega's ouster in a way that would not provoke widespread violence, given that the latter's base of support is so narrow. There are few who would risk their lives to protect him. If an attempt was made to set up an unconstitutional government, resistance could be met from some military commanders bent on preserving the institutions. It seems likely, however, that the coup plotters would wait to make their move until the Army develops a consensus that drastic action is necessary. While a relatively nonviolent transition seems more likely, the period following a change of government would be more violence prone. Leftist terrorists could be expected to step up their activities to whatever extent possible against a military government or one controlled by the military. Likewise, the new government would take what repressive

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measures it felt necessary to maintain itself. While there are dozens of imponderables in any scenario of this kind, the military is not likely to move until it has a good deal of public support for such action. The lessons of 1966-73 and the unpopularity of the Armed Forces that era produced will bear heavily in the minds of the army officers. Given this, and the increasing unpopularity of Mrs. Peron's government, it is unlikely that the left or any other sector could generate enough of a reaction on the part of the public to create widespread disturbances.

U. S. Interests

The violence from the left will continue to threaten foreign investment and businessmen in general. While kidnappings have fallen off, leftist guerrillas will exploit and aggravate worker discontent whenever possible. They have also of late assassinated several executives in firms that have had labor problems. The threat of violence, and, even more importantly, the increasingly difficult economic situation, will be strong disincentives to foreign investment.

The leftist guerrillas will continue to have the capability to undertake attacks against Embassy staff members and could do so at any time. Ultra-nationalistic rightwing terrorists will probably continue to concern themselves strictly with leftists and should not pose a threat to American business interests or USG employees.

Human Rights

Since the AAA appears to have some GOA backing, rightwing violence has the potential to result in serious human rights problems. While overshadowed by events in Chile, Argentina is beginning to receive more notoriety in this area. Four French representatives of the International Federation of Human Rights and the International Movement of Catholic Jurists completed a short visit to Argentina on May 24. Upon their departure, they stated that the right to defend and freedom of expression were "empty phrases" in Argentina. A full report is to be issued before the end of June.

The New York Times correspondent here told an Emboff recently that two leftist Peronist Youth leaders have been severely tortured since they were arrested on April 17 (BA 2765) despite the fact that their detentions were well publicized. One of the two, Dardo Cabo, has lost the use of one of his arms as a result of the torture, according to his parents.

The USG, of course, deplores terrorism of any kind. Leftist terrorism is a threat to U. S. business interests and to the Embassy staff while that from the right, when officially encouraged, is a violation of human rights. It is unfortunate that the GOA has used the latter to combat the former. Any representations made to the GOA should underline the USG opposition to violence from either extreme of the political spectrum to avoid giving any indication that extralegal means are acceptable.

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